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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the artistic and literary movement called "Postmodernism." Noting that postmodernism is intellectually grounded in the premise that its discourse must expose positions of privilege and power relations in society, the paper asks of art education, How much has the postmodern condition, a thesis of cultural relativism that denies that we can step outside of custom to judge custom, affected our domain? The paper first discusses the early 20th-century movement called "Dada" as a precursor to the postmodern condition. It explores Marcel Duchamp's "art making," when he abandoned painting and began to work with industrial or commercially produced materials that suited the expression of his ideas and his iconoclasm. Duchamp attempted to escape the realm of aesthetics, but in doing so he created a new aesthetic field. The paper then discusses the ideas of several postmodern theorists, including Pierre Bourdieu, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Arthur Danto, Fredric Jameson, and Robert Dixon. It contends that the notion of postmodernism as it applies to visual arts needs to be clearly defined and that the greatest danger art education faces is the inability of many educators to unravel the complexities of postmodern discourse and put into perspective its role in artistic discourse. (Contains 20 references.) (BT)

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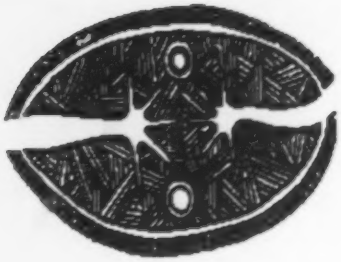

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by

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Victoria, Australia

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THE POSTMODERNIST DESCENDING THE STAIRCASE.

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To define an order of art requires a perception of the philosophical truth of art, the postmodern cannot define that order.

Postmodernism.

Postmodernism has brought forth new ways of thinking that have undervalued the role of the visual arts in contemporary society. Postmodern thinkers are from a range of disciplinary backgrounds and their rhetoric is reflective of many viewpoints, thus a confusion has arisen as to how these viewpoints relate to visual art discourse. The postmodern condition has provided educators with many theoretical contradictions and inconsistencies.

As an intellectual movement, the key protagonists, principally sociologists and philosophers, work on the premise that postmodern discourse must expose positions of privilege and power relations in society, in this sense they seek to deny history with its connotations as a carrier of such things as euro centricity and patriarchal domination, seen as the inherent biases of the age. But what has this to do with art, aesthetics and artistic truth? Can we even contemplate artistic truth in contemporary society? The pressing question for art education, is how much has the postmodern condition, a thesis of cultural relativism that denies that we can step outside of custom to judge custom, affected our domain.

Whilst the postmodernist would prefer to challenge history, to answer these questions, a step back into the past to look at another significant paradigm shift in art history, may help to elicit new ideas relevant for art education in postmodern times.

We live in a postmodern society influenced by technology and the explosion of electronic information. With a commitment to cultural pluralism and intellectual debate, we are continually asked to reassess and revisit the way knowledge is constructed. Art today, is principally issues based however there is still room for traditional forms of visual art alongside the new. Artists give society new visions, fresh perceptions and insights, their voices are valuable in both historical and contemporary forms. If we approach art education with altruistic aims then is not reactionary to aim for a balance of both past and present within our field.

Artistic debate has always produced periods of exciting intellectual challenge, artists have always questioned the status quo and in art there have been many significant periods of change. Oddly enough artists enjoy artistic diversity and can accept art in many guises without associated dogma.

Dada As A Precursor To The Postmodern Condition

During the early twentieth century, Dada provided a period of change similar in many respects to that arising in the postmodernist debate on the eve of the twenty first century. Marcel Duchamp is often seen as a precursor to the ideas inherent in postmodernism, yet there is a serious difference in approach. His *Nude Descending a Staircase* of 1913, began a period where the artist in his own words " borrowed from the world". Andre Breton called him the most intelligent man of the twentieth century and for many the most irritating. Upon being questioned what Breton meant, Duchamp defined "intelligence" as "the most elastic term one can invent", and of irritation, said that "it bothers people if you don't follow the style of the time, you become a rival".

Duchamp later abandoned painting as a medium for art making. He began to work with industrial or commercially produced materials such as "the ready-mades", that suited the expression of his ideas, more detached and intellectual, than subjective intuitive responses. His ultimate aim was to define an art form that was anti-aesthetic, that is, away from a domination by the senses. His artistic career was concerned with changing the concept of art in the 20th century, he tried to destroy the concept of artistic beauty inherent in

an aesthetic approach to art (Hill, 1994). Duchamp was in the forefront of redefining the whole notion of art as it had been by questioning the values associated with traditional forms of art making. Art was not to be beautiful, nor should the aesthetic be the search for the beautiful. Art for Duchamp was like his lifelong passion for chess, a chance to make new intellectual moves, he enjoyed the thinking behind the process, the idea, rather than the work itself. He commented in a review of his work in the New York Times on April 12,1963 that 'the dead part of art is when generation after generation copies one another".

Nude Descending The Staircase was described by Duchamp as a convergence in his mind of various interests, among them the cinema and the separation of static positions in the photochronographs of Marey in France, Eakins and Muybridge in America. He discarded completely the naturalistic appearance of a nude, keeping only the abstract lines of some twenty different static positions in the successive action of descending. He suggests that the nude was closer to the Cubist interest in decomposing forms than Futurism's interest in movement (Chipp 1968, p.393). Yet there is no doubt as he says that he had been inspired by the Italian artist Balla's painting of *Dog on a Leash* seen in a Futurist exhibition in 1913. He wanted to get away from the physicality of static painting and add a kinetic dimension, an interest in movement emanating from the social context of the industrial age.

Duchamp called the entire Modern movement 'retinal' and this perhaps explains his preoccupation with the 'cerebral' cartesian approach he took to art making, yet whilst Duchamp claimed to be influenced by a cartesian way of thinking and an intellectual preoccupation with breaking new ground defined his art making career, imagination was inherent in all the moves he made. This dichotomy between the influence of logic and imagination runs throughout his work. For Duchamp painting was not intuitive, it came from the 'idea' formed in the artist's brain, he respected the cognitive processes involved in art making, and by consistently advocating nihilism, he explored new horizons. In short his images, whether paintings or ready-mades, were planned or executed by a systematic process, objective rather than subjective.

> *Dada was an extreme protest against the physical side of painting. It was a metaphysical attitude. It was intimately and consciously involved with "literature". It was a sort of nihilism to which I am still very sympathetic. (Duchamp 1946 in Chipp 1968, p. 394)*

The material reality of *Nude Descending The Staircase,* became a physical manifestation of Walter Benjamin's "aura". The painting stood for something Duchamp would eventually try to escape later in his life, the emotional attachment was too sensuous for his disinterested logic. This turn around was a conceptual leap for Duchamp, he was to later become preoccupied with the "intellectual idea" rather than "emotional expression" using the tradition of painting. The aesthetic inherent in the painting was to be discarded, it became important for him that symbols were carried in new ways which held no past aesthetic associations for the spectator.

His reaction was to abandon painting to concentrate on the "ready-mades", sculptures of everyday objects such as *The Bicycle Wheel* (1913), and the urinal titled *Fountain* (1917), which became symbolic sarcastic jibes at the establishment. He described them as objects that portrayed an **indifference** to taste. The choice of these ready-mades heralded Duchamp's iconoclasm, his desire to break down the image in a deliberate attempt to abandon aesthetics. Described as an 'aesthetic nihilist', his later works were narrative rewrites using a different symbol system. Duchamp attempted to escape the realm of aesthetics, but in doing so he created a new aesthetic field.

Aesthetics is a nebulous concept with canons that shift and mutate, new aesthetic genres are inevitably formed. With similar nihilism, the rise of postmodernism began to deny all previous criteria that defined art by aesthetic criteria such as the materialist qualities of paint surface and application, and references to compositional devices such as harmony and balance, the emphasis has shifted to an interest in plurality of values reflecting the social context as much as the artistic value.

The period marking the end of modernism was defined by a lack of stylistic unity. Susie Gablik suggested in her text *Has Modernism Failed?*, that the most widespread attack on Modernism and the notion of art for art's sake came from the hard line Marxists for whom the idea of art's function as something purely aesthetic and individual, is spiritually sterile and corrupt. Marxist aesthetics demanded that art illuminate social relationships and help us to recognise and change social reality
(Gablik 1984, pp. 24&25), but in doing this art began to suffer widespread antagonism. The postmodern condition has raised a dilemma of truth in artistic terms, as Gablik puts it, should art maintain, "truth to the self" or "truth to the values of society"? (Gablik 1984,p.25).

Today, the rapid explosion of information technology has forced the world to develop a pluralist identity. One might argue that the dominance of global powers, now in the hands of a mere few, has limited the chances of artists retaining their independence, the global society has forced unity and a homogeneous approach. The

role the artist plays in society today, may be an even smaller role than we imagine as the emergence of many new cultural agents battle for centre stage.

Theorists have attempted to decipher the new age of postmodern society, characterised by an explosion of technology and massive population shifts resulting in international globalisation. The impact on culture and society has been significant, creating chaos in thinking and a fragmented world where categories no longer exist in traditional forms. In postmodern times there is no one truth, but many.

Major Players In The Postmodern Debate

It is widely acknowledged that aesthetics no longer applies as one dominant western canon, but is this a reason to discard it completely as some postmodern theorists would have us do? Each postmodern theorist in an attempt to explain changes in contemporary society takes on a characteristic role, which identifies their own individual ideological position, depending on whether they are philosophers or sociologists, from the left or the right.

Pierre Bourdieu a sociologist, would suggest differences of quality are to do with different fields of cultural production. He states that the artistic field is a field of power forces and struggles between the cultural agents. Change in the artistic field is the result of a change in power relations, and the boundary of the field reflects these struggles. Power relations lie with the cultural agents; producers, publicists and consumers, in the case of art; the artist, critic, spectator, art educator, publisher, gallery director, curator (Bourdieu 1994, p.65). Bourdieu sees patterns of taste reflecting the socio-economic circumstances of the participants. Today the proliferation of art and the accompanying publicity of the art market, has witnessed a rise of diverse agendas which have left the artist as a pawn in an arts and entertainment industry.

Confusion in defining the postmodern is exacerbated by the various viewpoints of its writers. **Jean- Francios Lyotard** suggested the postmodern aesthetic is the aesthetic of the sublime, something that alludes to something, but does not let itself be made present (Lyotard 1992, p.23). This tendency to be indecisive by constantly shifting ground is what **Terry Eagleton** (1996) called the "cult of ambiguity and indeterminacy".

For **Jean Baudrillard** postmodern art, is aesthetic disillusionment, it is "art recycling it's own garbage". He suggests that technology has allowed art to become hyperreal and thus the image has lost its emotional power of illusion, Benjamin's "aura". The spectator, in the overload of hyper reality, has also lost the power of the imagination and the ability to read various symbol systems, to engage in semiotics. Art has lost its spirituality as it has become more and more commodified.

Jacques Derrida deconstructs our society by suggesting that the field of cultural production is one which must be continually challenged in an attempt to produce a level playing field. His use of binary opposites eg. his and her, good art or bad art, is an attempt to look to "the other", to deconstruct the privileged position, in the case of art the dominant aesthetic; western / eastern, individual / collective art, high culture/ popular culture and so on.

Arthur Danto called postmodernism "post-historical" in its attempt to deny history. He suggests that the pre-eminent question shifted from "what is it that makes it an art work?" to "why am I a work of art?" This latter question defined for Danto the end of the history of modernism (Danto 1997, p.14) and raises the important question "what is the belief system that enables us to define something as a work of art?" and "is there a need for art in contemporary society?"

Arthur Danto believes that artists liberated from history are free to make art in whatever way they wished, for any purposes they wished for, or for no purpose at all (Danto 1997,p.15). He also suggested that at the end of modernism, artists were "putting art at the service of this or that personal or political agenda" but when postmodernism came along they appropriated images and dismantled ideology by working with the superficial image rather than being concerned with any emotional depth behind the image making. They put forward in their art works, multiple points of view which acted as irony, layers and meanings were many, and they could be analysed in many different ways, depending on the limits of knowledge and "tastes" of the spectator. With the dawn of postmodernism he suggested that artists moved away from "individualism" and "subjectivity".

Society to a large extent defines how an artist will or should work simply by material patronage and critical acclaim. Postmodernist discourse questions society's power structure and in doing so Modernism is revealed as a period where artists valued individual freedom, originality and subjectivity, a direct result of values formed in response to the horrors and influences of World War 1 and 2, Macarthyism, Thatcherism, Vietnam and so on. Many artists of the postmodern era on the other hand have been influenced by the impact of technology, they have become visually desensitised by the overload of hypereality, they are largely interested in the superficial appearance of an image, the image as a by product of ideas, the image as commodity.

Emotional engagement with aesthetic depth of the art work does not come into the equation for the majority of viewers who have also become passive consumers, often unable to comprehend the human connection and read an image's metaphoric meaning.

Fredric Jameson suggests postmodernism is interested only in light hearted citation or pastiche, a result of the culture of late capitalism, a consumer society interested in the continual flash of the fast image. The postmodern was to become known as a time of image plundering, where artists took images from everywhere and reinvented them in new juxtaposed ways.

Robert Dixon sees the postmodern condition as intellectual treason. He suggests that the postmodern debate has set back our cognitive confidence by involving philosophical debate in an absurd chase of the truth, which philosophy will never and can not provide answers for just by its very nature. He points out the pedagogical perversity of teaching philosophy with the aim of finding a theory of knowledge.

These diverse opinions highlight some of the difficulties we are faced with in art education when we attempt to explain the postmodern condition to students. It also suggests that we explore the whole notion of cultural relativism if we are to give the postmodern condition anything more than superficial lip service. As a theoretical field in its own right, it is useful to inform students at tertiary level, but questionable when placed within the context of a school curriculum, particularly in art education where the subject is largely taught through practical engagement with theory supporting practice. In any case postmodernism in art has not yet been clearly defined.

Postmodern theorists herald the era of the end of art (Danto 1995), and yet this statement emanates from the critic not the artist. Artistic truth always was, and still is, defined by the artist through the art works they make. Individual perception in free societies remain the wellspring of creation and the artist's imagination is the essence of their human expression.

If art educators are seduced by postmodern critics who tell us of the end of art, they are also acknowledging the loss of individual power. Art education's strength in the curriculum is that it integrates, thinking, feeling, expressing and doing, things that few other subjects can offer students. Artworks are the tangible practical results of a long process that involves perception, critical thinking, synthesis and analysis, aesthetic and visual discrimination on an individual basis. The artmaker makes a personal statement that builds confidence in the learning process and adds to emotional and intellectual personal identity.

Postmodernism in its attempt to bury aesthetics for good and concentrate on art for the fulfilment of social and political needs, may be ignoring the vital role of art and art education in contemporary society. Wolin suggests that,

> *the zero-degree aesthetic of postmodernist art engenders a wholesale loss of affect. It generates a surface-oriented aesthetic universe that is conducive to a drastic post-Freudian withdrawal of emotional cathexis. (Wolin 1997, p.32)*

To define an order of art requires a perception of one philosophical **truth** of art, this is no longer relevant in contemporary society. I would argue that the postmodern cannot define an order of art because the postmodernist thinker attempts to shift ground constantly to negate anything, with a nihilism similar to Duchamp's earlier attempts to dismantle aestheticism. Therefore, a particular 'artistic truth' cannot be pinned down long enough to categorise it. During Modernism new ideas were grouped together and became collective voices under the banners of styles such as Dada. Artists chose freely to work within these styles yet just as easily moved from style to style, movement to movement or remained independent. The notion of artistic truth in postmodern times is as much a misnomer as it was in modernism, artistic truth constantly shifts ground. It is the nature of creative thinking to question the status quo. Art will still be made as it always has in new forms, the new forms will carry with them new aesthetic criteria, there will be a new aesthetic order for every collective change in concept.

A definition of postmodernism in the visual arts is therefore full of contradiction. Postmodernism attempts to deny history yet relies inherently upon the images of the past for the key to its style, appropriation. Postmodernism attempts to expose the oppressions of the past and the individual artist is treated with contempt, artistic knowledge is used as collective possessions, gathered for the bower of the postmodern artist. If appropriation is seen as a stylistic device of some postmodernist art works, treated as a common thread it begins to define a new 'order' of art, but this is not what postmodernists want, it is too aesthetic, and like Duchamp they want to expose the elitism of art, but for different reasons.

The notion of Postmodernism as it applies to visual art needs to be clearly defined. We do live in postmodern times. We live lives that are complex and fragmented and influenced by technology. We live lives which are directly affected by many different cultural mores, we no longer live in isolated communities. The pluralistic

nature of postmodern times is awash with multiple aesthetic genres, this multiplicity is a reality, and very necessary as anchors for personal and cultural identity. Ironically, the postmodernists voicing their concern of past oppressions, demand a place for their own identity as well.

Art education plays a significant role in explaining the foundations of the symbolic order upon which the spectator will eventually draw to analyse a visual image. The depth of that education will determine the spectator's ability to read more than the literal truth. Truth content is not carried by the outer veneer of a picture, it's materialist content. The visual image will provide subject matter, qualities, and techniques as well as the ideas the artist intended to communicate. The visual image is created from both the intellectual and emotional facility of the creator.

It is true the order of art that once **was,** cannot be defined again, but on the other hand it cannot be denied. The history of art can still offer new artists knowledge and wisdom. In postmodern times the classification of new knowledge is as important to human identity as it was in the past.

Danto states that "whatever art is, it is no longer something primarily to be looked at " He further suggests that with the philosophical coming of age, visuality drops away (Danto 1997, p.16). This statement denies the visual symbolic system, that is a reality in our lives. It suggests we should not bother to contemplate or meditate upon a static image but only engage with the new visuality of the hyperreal, text and images conveyed by the mass media, a place where visual images become handmaidens to plots.

Duchamp called for art to be defined by artists rather than critics. He leaves us the legacy of the futility of trying to define a truth in art, there is none! Artists will always contradict the status quo. The main difference between Duchamp and the postmodernists is that he firmly believed that verbal "language was no damn good for the conveyance of ideas" (Harnoncourt and McShine, 1989 p.174) He respected and practised the visual language whilst the postmodern academics work with verbal language.

Peter Fuller stated that pictures are made by a human beings with a body and a range of emotions, " the underlying human condition", he believed this is central to the experience of the aesthetic effect. (Fuller, 1980,p.36) His belief in aesthetics was reinforced as he witnessed the destructive and controlling powers of dominant ideologies such the CIA in promoting and financially supporting Abstract Expressionism as a platform for the advancement of American patriotism. An incident in art history that highlights Bourdieu's concerns, the power of cultural agents to political intervene in suppressing the voice of the other side, social realist artists such as Deigo Rivera, one amongst many.

The artist can be social agent, cultural agent, political agent and individual agent and degrees of all these things. The importance of Derridean discourse and deconstruction show his openness to the "other", his critical strategies look at binary opposites in an attempt to expose the "other story". Derrida's critical approach challenges dominant hierarchies of power in the arts, he advocates a level playing field in which the arts consider marginalised art forms alongside other arts.

In a recent seminar in Sydney Derrida declined an invitation to describe the Abstract Expressionist painter Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles*. His inability to deconstruct this image in the face of a vacuum of knowledge, suggests his acknowledgment of the importance of history to the complete understanding of an artwork. It also highlights his ability to read figuration and not abstraction. In this instance Arthur Danto is right, understanding the painting is more than interpreting the visually obvious, if we deny history and read only the obvious, then we support artistic blindness by ignoring the context in which it was born.

Art educators as powerful facilitators of cultural production must be acutely aware of political pressures and social constraints as well as the enigma of contemporary aesthetics in a postmodern society. The art educator must understand the processes of learning fully through experiential involvement in art practice, appreciation and criticism. Studio practice engages the artist in analytical evaluation of the aesthetic problems relevant to their own works and those of others, artistic expression is both a conscious and unconscious struggle to bring to life intellectual concepts.

Art educators are the most open and flexible of educators, their creative abilities ensure that they are able to contend with change in a technologically driven society and yet their strengths are more than this. Their critical thinking abilities gained as a result of play, experimentation and problem solving in the studio, enable them to put into perspective the balances we need in life. Art is the interplay of sense and reason, the balance of emotional and intellectual cognition. Art educators do not come out of the one mold, yet their common ground is a respect for the values of the many different truths of art. By making and doing, art is questioning and thinking. Art transcends time and place, it is universal.

The greatest danger art education faces is the inability of many educators to unravel the complexities of **postmodern discourse** and put into perspective its role in **artistic discourse**. Unravelling the complexities

of postmodern discourse requires the art educator to understand and continually reassess the plurality of aesthetic values visual art presents us today.

To nurture a young artist or viewer requires us to teach them to be critical and inquiring. The challenge for the art educator is to accept the constant paradigm shifts within the domain and present students with changes in the aesthetic field. We do this by working with students in the studio, encouraging them to examine artistic principles and the sociological conditions in which art is made without ignoring the legacy of art history. To maintain a healthy scepticism of the theoretical implications of the postmodern condition we may in fact be protecting the visual art domain. Mark Constas states that there is reason to believe that postmodernism itself contains a measure of veiled censorship, and we should be careful to continue to question the value of emerging paradigms, especially those that displace pragmatic ideas so central to education, and for our purposes art education (Contas, 1999).

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